

unified sound, a beautiful sound. And that's the country that is now emerging in Iraq, a country that will work together and recognize everybody's rights. We're making good progress in Iraq. There's more to do, obviously, but the fact that the Iraqi Symphony is here and entertaining Americans is a sign of that progress.

And we thank you all for coming. We wish you Godspeed.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:01 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Mohammed Amin Ezzat, conductor, Iraqi National Symphony; and Rend Rahim Francke, head of Iraq's Interest Section in the U.S. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Statement on the Death of Paul Simon *December 10, 2003*

Laura and I were saddened to learn of the death of former Senator Paul Simon. Paul Simon contributed significantly to America as an Army special agent, newspaper publisher, Member of the United States Senate and House of Representa-

tives, and author and teacher. He will be missed by the many people in Illinois and throughout the country whose lives he touched and improved. Laura and I send our condolences to his family and many friends.

Statement on the Death of Bob Bartley *December 10, 2003*

Bob Bartley was a giant of journalism. His extraordinary contributions to America as an author, editor, and columnist helped shape our times. I was pleased to award him the Presidential Medal of Freedom,

our highest civil honor, in recognition of his enormous impact on the intellectual and political life of our Nation. Laura joins me in sending condolences to Edith and his daughters, family, colleagues, and friends.

Remarks Following a Cabinet Meeting and an Exchange With Reporters *December 11, 2003*

The President. I want to thank the members of my Cabinet for coming for what will be the last Cabinet meeting of the year 2003. I've just heard from each Cabinet member about the accomplishments in the year 2003. This has been an historic year. America is safer. America is more prosperous. America is a better place be-

cause of the actions this administration has taken.

In order to secure America, we liberated the people of Iraq from a brutal tyrant, and now we're in the process of rebuilding that country, along with others, and we're making good progress.

In order to make sure people could find work in America, we proposed and Congress passed an economic stimulus package, and that package is making a significant difference on our economy. Our economy is strong; it is vibrant. People are finding work, but we won't rest until everybody who wants to find a job can find one.

The country is better off for a lot of reasons. A significant piece of legislation was passed by the Congress, which I recently signed, and that is the Medicare reform bill. We took on a tough issue; we worked with Congress to make sure that we fulfilled a promise to America's seniors by modernizing and strengthening Medicare.

This has been a year of accomplishment. We also recognize we've got a job to do, to continue to do for the American people, to keep this country safe and prosperous and strong and a better place for all our citizens. And we look forward to working with the Congress in the year '04 to accomplish those objectives.

Today is Mel Martinez's, the fine Secretary of HUD, last meeting. Mel has served our country with class and distinction. I'm proud, Mel, to have had you on this team. Good job.

Secretary Martinez. Thank you, sir.

The President. I'll answer a couple of questions—that would be two questions. Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press].

Iraqi Reconstruction Contracts

Q. Mr. President, what did the leaders of France, Russia, and Germany say to you yesterday about being excluded from contracts, reconstruction contracts in Iraq? And can those countries be considered for the contract if they forgive debt that's owed by Iraq?

The President. Let me make sure everybody understands that men and women from our country, who proudly wear our uniform, risked their life to free Iraq. Men and women from other countries in a broad coalition risked their lives to free Iraq. And

the expenditure of U.S. dollars will reflect the fact that U.S. troops and other troops risked their life.

Now, we want to work with all countries. We have a common goal, and that is to see that Iraq is free and peaceful. It is in every nation's interest that Iraq be free and peaceful, and we welcome contributions. We welcome people's willingness to participate in this difficult yet important job of rebuilding Iraq.

Holland [Steve Holland, Reuters].

Q. Sir, Chancellor Schroeder says international law must apply in this case. What's your understanding of the law?

The President. International law? I better call my lawyer. He didn't bring that up to me. I asked President Chirac and Chancellor Schroeder and President Putin to see Jim Baker to talk about debt restructuring. If these countries want to participate in helping the world become more secure by enabling Iraq to emerge as a free and peaceful country, one way to contribute is through debt restructuring. And so Jim Baker, with the consent of the Secretary of State, is going to go over and talk to these leaders about that. But I don't know what you're talking about, about international law. I've got to consult my lawyer.

Iraqi Debt Relief

Q. Can I clarify one thing?

The President. Yes, you may clarify something.

Q. Thank you very much.

The President. Depends on what it is, though. [Laughter]

Q. Same issue.

The President. Okay.

Q. You seem to be saying that the boots on the ground are the only qualifications for—but what about the forgiveness of debt? Isn't that a fairly substantial—

The President. It is. It would be a significant contribution for which we would be very grateful. What I'm saying is, in the expenditure of taxpayers' money—and that's what we're talking about now—the

U.S. people, the taxpayers, understand why it makes sense for countries that risk lives to participate in the contracts in Iraq. It's very simple. Our people risk their lives; coalition—friendly coalition folks risk their lives; and therefore, the contracting is going to reflect that. And that's what the U.S. taxpayers expect.

Thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:51 a.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; President Jacques Chirac of France; Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany; President Vladimir Putin of Russia; and James A. Baker III, the President's personal envoy on the issue of Iraqi debt. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks at a Bush-Cheney Luncheon in McLean, Virginia December 11, 2003

Thanks for the warm welcome. Thanks for coming. Thanks for your strong support. I tell you what we're doing here: We're laying the foundation to make sure that we carry Virginia again in 2004, and we're laying the foundation for what is going to be a great nationwide victory in 2004. And I really appreciate your help. I also appropriate you letting some Oklahoma folks come today too. [Laughter] Yes, that's what—[inaudible]. Tell them hello in Tulsa.

I want you to know that I am—I'm getting ready for the campaign. I'm loosening up. [Laughter] But politics is going to come in its own time. See, I've got a job to do. I'm focusing on the people's business. I want you to remind your neighbors and your friends that this administration will continue to work hard to earn the confidence of every single citizen by keeping this Nation secure and strong and prosperous and free.

I want to thank the attorney general for his kind introductory remarks. I appreciate you, General. I appreciate the fact that you're going to be the campaign chairman of the Bush-Cheney '04 campaign. I'm counting on you to energize the grassroots. And for those of you who are involved in the party like Kate Griffin, who's the party chairman, and other folks who are out in

the precincts, thank you for what you are going to do.

I'm so proud that I married above myself. I'm sorry the First Lady is not here with me. Laura is a great wife, a great mother, and a great First Lady for our country. She sends her very best, and she sends her warm regards to all our friends here in northern Virginia.

Speaking about great family members, I am lucky to have a great brother who's from the great State of Virginia. He is my friend. He is—he comes to the White House; he helps remind me about what is important in life, and what is important is family. And Marvin Bush, I want to thank you for your love.

I'm also proud to be closely working with the chairman—I call him the chairman—one of the great leaders in the United States Senate, somebody who has stood strong for the State of Virginia and, more importantly, has stood strong for America by making sure we are a strong nation, and that is Senator John Warner. I know your former Governor is here with us today, my good friend Jim Gilmore. Thank you for coming, Jim. I appreciate your support.

I want to thank my friend Dwight Schar, who is the State finance chairman for Bush-